

Youth Economic Prospects and the Decline of Two-Parent Families

The Two Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind,
By Melissa S. Kearney (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2023)

Reviewed by Ryan DiGiacomo

Over the past four decades, the fraction of children in the U.S. who live with married parents dropped from 77% in 1980 down to 63% today. Melissa Kearney's *The Two Parent Privilege* discusses the possible links between this steep downward trend in children raised in a two-parent household and the worrisome upward trend of income inequality.

Kearney is the Neil Moskowitz Professor of Economics at the University of Maryland, as well as the Director of the Aspen Economic Strategy Group. From her earliest publications in 2004 to her recent testimony before Congressional bodies, she has always been concerned with the growing issues of income inequality and the social outcomes of children. Kearney's ample empirical work investigates data bases from well-recognized national data sources, such as the National Center for Health Statistics and the Current Population Survey.

Kearney concludes from her data analysis that, when a child is raised in a two-parent household, they are given access to double the resources, whether financially or emotionally than comparable children in households where one parent takes all of the strain and responsibility of parenting. Whether or not there is a clear answer for why current rates of marriage are falling, she devotes considerable attention to exploring a host of possible factors.

As an economist herself, Kearney gives priority to economic explanatory variables for why parents are not staying together to help raise their children. She starts with the role that a college degree plays in children possessing two parental figures. When children possess a mother who has achieved a four-year college degree, they are very likely to live with married parents. The odds of this occurring in 1980 was 90%, and by 2019 the figure dropped down to 84%. When presented with the opposite scenario, where a mother does not have a four-year college degree, Kearney makes a different observation. While in 1980 the occurrence of these children living with married parents was 83%, the likelihood of this being the case in 2019 was only 60%. The conclusion that

college education plays a role in whether or not children live with married parents, drives the author into a discussion about the long-running increase in economic inequality in US society.

Kearney next evaluates the family structure of different racial and ethnic groups. White and Asian children are much more likely to live with married parents when compared to Black and Hispanic families. The two-parent rate for Hispanics is 62% and a mere 38% for Blacks. Globally, such inequality is also observed across various countries: the share of children living with only one parent in the US is 23%, 15% in Canada, and 7% in Mexico. This makes the US rates significantly higher and more concerning than the overall global rate, which was found to be 7%. Across the Atlantic, European nations also see a similar trend to what is occurring in the US, where higher educated mothers are more likely to participate in a two-parent household than less-educated moms, though the difference is not nearly as drastic as in the United States. From this, Kearney concludes that the growing class gap in family structure amplifies the earnings inequality amongst American families.

Marriage as an institution could be defined as two people combining and sharing resources in a long-term contract. Pooling resources, as supported by Kearney's data, is much better than children possessing the resources of one parent alone. By resources, Kearney includes money, time, and emotional energy involved in raising a child. When a child has access to more of these resources, they are presented with more opportunities, meaning that there is a massive difference in experiences and outcomes when comparing children with and without two active parents. Without the support of a partner, single parents could release more stress and anger onto a child, and have less time to spend with them to give the child quality memories that help their minds develop healthily.

Since it's much more likely for single parents to be women, it begs the question: where are the men? Kearney observes a statistical relationship linking declines in male earnings and shrinking

marriage rates. Research has established a causal link between men's declining economic status and a decline in marriage rates, where women are seeing these men as less-attractive candidates for marriage. Women want their children to receive the benefit of having double the resources available to them, and with men not being able to provide as many resources, women do not seem attracted to the institution of marriage.

The declining status of men is only compounded by the common conclusion that parenting is very hard. Kids are expensive, with middle-income families with two kids needing to spend more than \$230,000 to raise a child from 0-17 years old. This huge figure is not possible for some as a result of the large class gaps in US society. Kearney also posits that married parents are likely to spend more time with their children than unmarried parents do. Unmarried parents need to work more to stay afloat, and with the financial strain comes stress, and with the stress comes greater hardship of being a parent. This makes it a priority to save the institution of marriage, as Kearney states, by bringing fathers into the fold.

Fathers are important, surely a common conclusion that many people would make. This is shown through Kearney's data analysis as well, since boys are shown to do relatively worse than girls when there is not a dad present in the home. This cuts across many dimensions, from behavioral, to educational, to economically. One solution Kearney proposes for this household cavity is the normalization of community mentors and positive role models in order to fill the hole left in the life of a child without a father. Another way to bring more fathers into the fold is to help them address growing issues, such as joblessness, mass incarceration, untreated mental illness, and an opioid epidemic.

It is clear that the family structure is changing, and that society has to adapt to save the futures of many children. Lately, there has been a marked decline in birth rates in the US. Whenever there is a financial crisis, Kearney states that there is also a decline in the birth rates to match it, likely due to the lack of available resources and stability. However, after the 2007-10 financial crisis, birth rates dropped but never recovered. It is also true that parents feel that raising children is exhausting and expensive, resulting in a shift in the priorities of young adults. This also resulted in the increase of births to unmarried mothers, which has doubled in the past 40 years.

In conclusion, it could be said that the United States needs to target promoting healthy co-parenting in order to reverse the parental trends in society. There needs to be more government and community programs in order to help children who are financially disadvantaged close the class gap and give more resources for single parents to use, therefore equalizing the playing field. Public support is also important and can make possible a host of additional resources for single parents to use.

As many economists know, there has been a significant increase in economic inequality, resulting in the middle class is slowly fading

away. This perfectly illustrates the difference between college educated parents and non-college educated parents. With college getting more expensive, the individuals who pool their resources together through marriage may bring significantly more resources to the education of their child. However, those that are not college educated do not have an excess of wealth, or at least enough where the prospect of marriage seems intriguing or beneficial to raising children. Therefore, when children born to college-educated parents grow up, they will be taught to see the same marriage benefits while those that did not go to college will not be able to afford to send their children to college to better themselves and have the resources to break this perpetual cycle. Kearney does not delve into this matter further, but as a reader, I concluded that one reason why this must be is because the benefits of marriage are only recognized by those with greater smarts gained by college, whereas those without a college education are stuck with thinking that marriage would not be a beneficial option for their kids.

The children who are hurt by the decrease in marriage rates are not at fault for their lack of two parental figures in their lives, as Kearney states, but rather are victims of a system that is moving away from the old means of cooperation into one of greater inequality. There is a divide between the rich and poor, where the rich are taught to marry and pool resources to benefit kids who will accumulate more riches, and the poor who were never taught anything else that is better. Due to their financial status, poorer individuals are not seen as fit partners, which is why the majority of marriages happen in households with wealth. These trends lead to a cycle that spirals out of control and only sets future generations up to the same fates as those who came before.

A deep analysis of Professor Kearney's work would suggest that she would best align with the Human Resource Management School of Thought. It could be said that Kearney believes in a "misalignment" of resources that are not being properly allocated to fully support single parents and their children. The resources that are being divided now favor the wealthier, college-educated class over the lower-income non-college class. Throughout the book, Kearney proposes social programs to bring mentors and enriched learning experiences into the lives of disadvantaged children, rather than believing that lower-income classes are at fault for not having enough resources for their kids. In a world of growing inequality, it is harder for once-disadvantaged groups to make the leap into an educated, two-parent household.

One outcome from this book that I expected was a greater understanding of the possible solutions to the two-parent privilege. Kearney, unfortunately, does not spend much time explaining solutions to the growing problems presented, but rather teases the concepts. As someone with a background in improving policy decisions, Kearney's decision to turn away from elaborating on possible in-depth solutions shows that her primary aim was only to bring awareness to issues that she believed were not talked about widely enough. Collaborations with lawmakers and activists might have been a fruitful means for proposing realistic and thoughtful

solutions, exploiting data-driven results to shape in-depth policy analysis. However, Kearney leaves it to her readers to engage the debate over optimal social support initiatives.

In this reader's opinion, the best solution to the two-parent privilege may be to focus more on the well-being of men. A traditional 20th century role for men, when a majority of jobs were still Fordist-manufacturing jobs reserved for them, was to be the breadwinner in a two-parent household. In the postwar age of strong unions and pro-labor federal policies, this seemed beneficial for the growth of the middle class and allowed the creation of a never-before-seen level of economic stability. However, the Post-Fordist world offshored these jobs, and the traditional breadwinner role of blue-collar men has been reduced at the same time that birth control, divorce and women's workforce participation increased. Efforts to help women get into the workforce and break down traditional gender roles were great for combatting long-standing sexism, for fueling economic growth and modernizing the structure of society, but contributed to the marginalization of men.

But it can be argued that they resulted in blue-collar working men being largely ignored for many decades. There were efforts to help women break into the industries that men once dominated, without comparable efforts made to help men break into the areas that women once dominated – including fast-growing job sources like health care and tech services. Combining this with the disappearance of physical labor and manufacturing jobs to offshoring, men have been left without a purpose in society and minimal support to find a purpose. This may be why many men are facing worse outcomes than ever before, and in turn make them even more unsuitable partners for marriage or raising a family in women's eyes. The uneducated men who worked the manufacturing jobs are left without any job and any relevant skills that could translate into economic success. This starts the cycle described above, where these men cannot afford to send their children to college, and those children cannot afford to send their children to college, etc. Unless both conservatives and liberals agree that the competitive disadvantage men face in society is crippling to the outcomes of children, the two-parent privilege will remain. Some children will receive double the resources devoted to other children, since a restricted number of men are able to contribute their share of resources to the household and to a marriage. Inequality will only grow, both in the US and across the globe, unless social reforms are made to bring greater aid to the needs of displaced men.

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